ALVISSMOL

The Ballad of Alvis

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

No better summary of the Alvissmol can be given than Gering's statement that "it is a versified chapter from the skaldic Poetics." The narrative skeleton, contained solely in stanzas 1-8 and in 35, is of the slightest; the dwarf Alvis, desirous of marrying Thor's daughter, is compelled by the god to answer a number of questions to test his knowledge. That all his answers are quite satisfactory makes no difference whatever to the outcome. The questions and answers differ radically from those of the *Vafthruthnismol*. Instead of being essentially mythological, they all concern synonyms. Thor asks what the earth, the sky, the moon, and so on, are called " in each of all the worlds," but there is no apparent significance in the f act that the gods call the earth one thing and the giants call it another; the answers are simply strings of poetic circumlocutions, or "kennings." Concerning the use of these "kennings" in skaldic poetry, cf. introductory note to the *Hymiskvitha*.

Mogk is presumably right in dating the poem as late as the twelfth century, assigning it to the period of "the Icelandic renaissance of skaldic poetry." It appears to have been the work of a man skilled in poetic construction,--Thor's questions, for instance, are neatly balanced in pairs,--and fully familiar with the intricacies of skaldic diction, but distinctly weak in his mythology. In other words, it is learned rather than spontaneous poetry. Finnur Jonsson's attempt to make it a tenth century Norwegian poem baffles logic. Vigfusson is pretty sure the poem shows marked traces of Celtic influence, which is by no means incompatible with Mogk's theory (cf. introductory note to the *Rigsthula*).

The poem is found only in *Regius*, where it follows the Thrymskvitha. Snorri quotes stanzas 2c, and 30, the manuscripts of the *Prose Edda* giving the name of the poem as *Alvissmol*, *Alsvinnsmol* or *Olvismol*. It is apparently in excellent condition, without serious errors of transmission, although interpolations or omissions in such a poem might have been made so easily as to defy detection.

The translation of the many synonyms presents, of course,

{p. 184}

unusual difficulties, particularly as many of the Norse words can be properly rendered in English only by more or less extended phrases. I have kept to the original meanings as closely as I could without utterly destroying the metrical structure.

Alvis spake:
1. "Now shall the bride | my benches adorn,
And homeward haste forthwith;

Eager for wedlock | to all shall I seem,
Nor at home shall they rob me of rest."

Thor spake:
2. "What, pray, art thou? | Why so pale round the nose?
By the dead hast thou lain of late?
To a giant like | dost thou look, methinks;
Thou wast not born for the bride."

Alvis spake:
3. "Alvis am I, | and under the earth
My home 'neath the rocks I have;

[1. *Alvis* ("All-Knowing"): a dwarf, not elsewhere mentioned. The manuscript nowhere indicates the speakers' name. The bride in question is Thor's daughter; Thruth ("Might") is the only daughter of his whose name is recorded, and she does not appear elsewhere in the poems. Her mother was Sif, Thor's wife, whereas the god's sons were born of a giantess. *Benches*: cf. *Lokasenna*, 15 and note.

2. The dwarfs, living beyond the reach of the sun, which was fatal to them (cf. stanzas 16 and 35), were necessarily pale. Line 3 is, of course, ironical.

3. *Wagon-guider*: Thor, who travels habitually on his goat drawn wagon. Bugge changes "Vagna vets" to "Vapna verþs," {footnote p. 185} rendering the line "I am come to seek the cost of the weapons." In either case, Alvis does not as yet recognize Thor.]

{p. 185}

With the wagon-guider | a word do I seek,
Let the gods their bond not break."

Thor spake:
4. "Break it shall I, | for over the bride
Her father has foremost right;
At home was I not | when the promise thou hadst,
And I give her alone of the gods."

Alvis spake:
5. "What hero claims | such right to hold
O'er the bride that shines so bright?
Not many will know thee, | thou wandering man!
Who was bought with rings to bear thee?"

Thor spake:
6. "Vingthor, the wanderer | wide, am I,
And I am Sithgrani's son;
Against my will | shalt thou get the maid,
And win the marriage word."

[4. Apparently the gods promised Thor's daughter in marriage to Alvis during her father's absence, perhaps as a reward for some craftsmanship of his (cf. Bugge's suggestion as to stanza 3). The text of line 4 is most uncertain.

5. *Hero*: ironically spoken; Alvis takes Thor for a tramp, the god's uncouth appearance often leading to such mistakes; cf. *Harbarthsljoth*, 6. Line 4 is a trifle uncertain; some editors alter the wording to read "What worthless woman bore thee?"

6. *Vingthor* ("Thor the Hurler"): cf. *Thrymskvitha*, 1. *Sithgrani* ("Long-Beard"): Othin.]

{p. 186}

Alvis spake:
7. "Thy good-will now | shall I quickly get,
And win the marriage word;
I long to have, | and I would not lack,
This snow-white maid for mine."

Thor spake:
8. "The love of the maid | I may not keep thee
From winning, thou guest so wise,
If of every world | thou canst tell me all
That now I wish to know.

9. "Answer me, Alvis! | thou knowest all,
Dwarf, of the doom of men:
What call they the earth, | that lies before all,
In each and every world?"

Alvis spake:
10. " 'Earth' to men, 'Field' | to the gods it is,
'The Ways' is it called by the Wanes;

[8. *Every world*: concerning the nine worlds, cf. Voluspo, 2 and note. Many editors follow this stanza with one spoken by Alvis, found in late paper manuscripts, as follows: "Ask then, Vingthor, since eager thou art / The lore of the dwarf to learn; / Oft have I fared in the nine worlds all, / And wide is my wisdom of each."

10. *Men*, etc.: nothing could more clearly indicate the author's mythological inaccuracy than his confusion of the inhabitants of the nine worlds. Men (dwellers in Mithgarth) appear in each of Alvis's thirteen answers; so do the gods (Asgarth) and the giants (Jotunheim). The elves (Alfheim) appear in eleven {footnote p. 187} answers, the Wanes (Vanaheim) in nine, and the dwarfs (who occupied no special world, unless one identifies them with the dark elves of Svartalfaheim) in seven. The dwellers "in hell" appear in six stanzas; the phrase probably refers to the world of the dead, though Mogk thinks it may mean the dwarfs. In stanzas where the gods are already listed appear names else where applied only to them,--"holy ones," "sons of the gods" and "high ones,"--as if these names meant beings of a separate race. "Men" appears twice in the same stanza, and so do the giants, if one assumes that they are "the sons of Suttung." Altogether it is useless to pay much attention to the mythology of Alvis's replies.]

{p. 187}

'Ever Green' by the giants, | 'The Grower' by elves,
'The Moist' by the holy ones high."

Thor spake:
11. "Answer me, Alvis! | thou knowest all,
Dwarf, of the doom of men:
What call they the heaven, | beheld of the high one,
In each and every world?"

Alvis spake:
12. " 'Heaven' men call it, | 'The Height' the gods,
The Wanes 'The Weaver of Winds';
Giants 'The Up-World,' | elves 'The Fair-Roof,'
The dwarfs 'The Dripping Hall.'"

[11. Lines I, 2, and 4 of Thor's questions are regularly abbreviated in the manuscript. *Beheld*, etc.: the word in the manuscript is almost certainly an error, and all kinds of guesses have been made to rectify it. All that can be said is that it means "beheld of" or "known to" somebody.]

{p. 188}

Thor spake:
13. "Answer me, Alvis! | thou knowest all,
Dwarf, of the doom of men.:
What call they the moon, | that men behold,
In each and every world?"

Alvis spake:
14. "'Moon' with men, 'Flame' | the gods among,
'The Wheel' in the house of hell;
'The Goer' the giants, | 'The Gleamer' the dwarfs,
The elves 'The Teller of Time."

Thor spake:
15. "Answer me, Alvis! | thou knowest all,
Dwarf, of the doom of men:
What call they the sun, | that all men see,
In each and every world?"

Alvis spake:
16. "Men call it 'Sun,' | gods 'Orb of the Sun,'
'The Deceiver of Dvalin' the dwarfs;
The giants 'The Ever-Bright,' | elves 'Fair Wheel,'
'All-Glowing' the sons of the gods."

[14. *Flame*: a doubtful word; Vigfusson suggests that it properly means a "mock sun." *Wheel*: the manuscript adds the adjective "whirling," to the destruction of the metre; cf. *Hovamol*, 84, 3.

16. *Deceiver of Dvalin*: Dvalin was one of the foremost dwarfs; cf. *Voluspo*, 14, *Fafnismol*, 13, and *Hovamol*, 144. The {footnote p. 189} sun "deceives" him because, like the other dwarfs living under ground, he cannot live in its light, and always fears lest sunrise may catch him unaware. The sun's rays have power to turn the dwarfs into stone, and the giantess Hrimgerth meets a similar fate (cf. *Helgakvitha Hjorvarthssonar*, 30). Alvis suffers in the same way; cf. stanza 35.]

{p. 189}

Thor spake:
17. "Answer me, Alvis! | thou knowest all,
Dwarf, of the doom of men:
What call they the clouds, | that keep the rains,
In each and every world?"

Alvis spake:
18. "'Clouds' men name them, | 'Rain-Hope' gods call them,
The Wanes call them 'Kites of the Wind';
'Water-Hope' giants, | 'Weather-Might' elves,
'The Helmet of Secrets' in hell."

Thor spake:
19. "Answer me, Alvis! | thou knowest all,
Dwarf, of the doom of men:
What call they the wind, | that widest fares,
In each and every world?"

Alvis spake:
20. "'Wind' do men call it, | the gods 'The Waverer,'
'The Neigher' the holy ones high;

[20. Snorri quotes this stanza in the *Skaldskaparmal*. *Waverer*: the word is uncertain, the Prose Edda manuscripts giving it in various forms. *Blustering Blast*: two *Prose Edda* manuscripts give a totally different word, meaning "The Pounder."]

{p. 190}

'The Wailer' the giants, | 'Roaring Wender' the elves,
In hell 'The Blustering Blast.'

Thor spake:
21. "Answer me, Alvis! | thou knowest all
Dwarf, of the doom of men:
What call they the calm, | that quiet lies,
In each and every world?"

Alvis spake:
22. " 'Calm' men call it, | 'The Quiet' the gods,
The Wanes 'The Hush of the Winds';

'The Sultry' the giants, | elves 'Day's Stillness,'
The dwarfs 'The Shelter of Day.'

Thor spake:
23. "Answer me, Alvis! | thou knowest all,
Dwarf, of the doom of men:
What call they the sea, | whereon men sail,
In each and every world?"

Alvis spake:
24. " 'Sea' men call it, | gods 'The Smooth-Lying,'
'The Wave' is it called by the Wanes;

[22. *Hush*, etc.: the manuscript, by inserting an additional letter, makes the word practically identical with that translated "Kite" in stanza 18. Most editors have agreed as to the emendation.

24. *Drink-Stuff*: Gering translates the word thus; I doubt it, but can suggest nothing better.]

{p. 191}

'Eel-Home' the giants, | 'Drink-Stuff' the elves,
For the dwarfs its name is 'The Deep.'

Thor spake:
25. "Answer me, Alvis! | thou knowest all,
Dwarf, of the doom of men:
What call they the fire, | that flames for men,
In each of all the worlds?"

Alvis spake:
26. " 'Fire' men call it, | and 'Flame' the gods,
By the Wanes is it 'Wildfire' called;
'The Biter' by giants, | 'The Burner' by dwarfs,
'The Swift' in the house of hell."

Thor spake:
27. "Answer me, Alvis! | thou knowest all,
Dwarf, of the doom of men:
What call they the wood, | that grows for mankind,
In each and every world?"

Alvis spake:
28. "Men call it 'The Wood, | gods 'The Mane of the Field,'

[26. *Wildfire*: the word may mean any one of various things, including "Wave," which is not unlikely.

28. *In hell*: the word simply means "men," and it is only a guess, though a generally accepted one, that here it refers to the dead.]

{p. 192}

'Seaweed of Hills' in hell;
'Flame-Food' the giants, | 'Fair-Limbed' the elves,
'The Wand' is it called by the Wanes."

Thor spake:
29. "Answer me, Alvis! | thou knowest all,
Dwarf, of the doom of men:
What call they the night, | the daughter of Nor,
In each and every world?"

Alvis spake:
30. "'Night' men call it, | 'Darkness' gods name it,
'The Hood' the holy ones high;
The giants 'The Lightless,' | the elves 'Sleep's joy"
The dwarfs 'The Weaver of Dreams.'"

Thor spake:
31. "Answer me, Alvis! | thou knowest all,
Dwarf, of the doom of men:
What call they the seed, | that is sown by men,
In each and every world?"

[29. *Nor*: presumably the giant whom Snorri calls Norvi or Narfi, father of Not (Night) and grandfather of Dag (Day). Cf. *Vafthruthnismol*, 25.

30. Snorri quotes this stanza in the *Skaldskaparmal*. The various *Prose Edda* manuscripts differ considerably in naming the gods, the giants, etc. *Lightless*: some manuscripts have "The Unsorrowing."

32. *Grain*: the two words translated "grain" and "corn" apparently both meant primarily barley, and thence grain in {footnote p. 193} general, the first being the commoner term of the two. *Drink-Stuff*: the word is identical with the one used, and commented on, in stanza 24, and again I have followed Gering's interpretation for want of a better one. If his guess is correct, the reference here is evidently to grain as the material from which beer and other drinks are brewed.]

{p. 193}

Alvis spake:
32. "Men call it 'Grain,' | and 'Corn' the gods,
'Growth' in the world of the Wanes;
'The Eaten' by giants, | 'Drink-Stuff' by elves,
In hell 'The Slender Stem.'

Thor spake:
33. "Answer me, Alvis! | thou knowest all,
Dwarf, of the doom of men:
What call they the ale, | that is quaffed of men,
In each and every world?"

Alvis spake:
34. "'Ale' among men, | 'Beer' the gods among,
In the world of the Wanes 'The Foaming';
'Bright Draught' with giants, | 'Mead' with dwellers in hell,
'The Feast-Draught' with Suttung's sons."

Thor spake:
.3.5. "In a single breast | I never have seen
More wealth of wisdom old;

[34. *Suttung's sons*: these ought to be the giants, but the giants are specifically mentioned in line 3. The phrase "Suttung's sons" occurs in Skirnismol, 34, clearly meaning the giants. Concerning Suttung as the possessor of the mead of poetry, cf. Hovamol, 104.]

{p. 194}

But with treacherous wiles | must I now betray thee:
The day has caught thee, dwarf!
(Now the sun shines here in the hall.)"

[35. Concerning the inability of the dwarfs to endure sunlight, which turns them into stone, cf. stanza 16 and note. Line 5 may be spurious.]

{p. 195}